

Practical uses for miniature Cheviot sheep
Weed management
by Eddie Miller

Here at the Bee Skep Ranch, springtime means high winds and a plethora of newly emerging weeds and sprouting brush. For fire safety and a neat yard, removing noxious (and mostly non-native) weeds is imperative. For the most part, we take a Green approach whenever possible. We do not use weed-killers that might later be eaten by our livestock, or accidentally ingested by our toddler. To tackle the weed problem, we use our miniature Cheviot sheep.



Figure 1. Thorny Chico branches and sprouting sticker bushes are on the menu for mini Cheviot sheep.

The first thing you should understand is that sheep will eat, or at least sample, *any plant*. However, here in the desert, when all the green has been eaten, anything is fair game! In the case of my trees, my sheep have eaten small saplings, including pine trees. 3-4 year old poplar trees are not immune to sheep destruction. If given the chance, they will eat leaves as high up as they can reach, and then work on the bark. I have learned this the hard way. Even so, I'm committed to using the sheep as weed-eaters *under controlled circumstances*.



Figure 2. A girdled poplar tree; bark stripped by sheep



Figure 3. Tree protected with wire

Chicken wire, non-climb, welded wire, etc. is adequate to keep sheep from the trees. You can wrap it directly around the tree, but take care to monitor the wire. As your tree grows, the wire will cut into the trunk, and can permanently damage, and even kill your tree. We use 3-4 stakes, which stick up about 4 feet out of the ground, about 6-8 inches from each tree. We wrap the wire around the stakes to create a safe zone. For longer runs, such as a tree line, we simply use 3 foot tall livestock fencing. Do not use wire with big opening, as many times, sheep will get their head through, then forget how to get out. You will have to *rescue* them for the fence, often several times a day. Don't think they'll eventually get thirsty and decide to pull out on their own. I've tested this, and many times a sheep will sit there for days with its head stuck in the fence, and only pull free as I approach to free it. If your sheep are ear-tagged, they will often tear their tags out.



Figure 4. Brecknock Hill ewe eating newly sprouted sticker bushes through the fence. This fencing has openings that are too large. She has torn out her tag, and the rams have gotten their heads stuck on several occasions. Use wire with smaller openings

Another fence that I've used with some success is electric netting, which is available from many ranch supply stores. I purchased mine in 100 foot lengths through the Premiere Sheep catalog. They have several types available. To operate it, you will need an energizer, which is a box you plug into an outlet. The current flows from the outlet to the box, then into the fence. There are also battery operated energizers, and solar energizers. Unfortunately, I didn't have much luck here with the solar energizer. Blowing dust from the desert continuously settled on the solar cell, and obscured it from the sun. No sunlight, no power. My sheep test the netting daily. If it's off, they go under it. The key to operating electric netting successfully is having a dependable energizer, and making sure that the wire doesn't inadvertently ground out. I can't stress this enough: *Always read the manufacturer's instructions when installing and operating electric netting!*



Figure 5. Sheep behind portable electric netting. This is a short run, so I have it doubled.



Figure 6. Trees are protected by the fence, but the sheep are still attacking weeds near the wire. Note, the foreground is completely bare, and ready for pasture planting. It used to be thick with thorny brush, as seen in the background.

I have observed the sheep as weed-eaters when they are allowed to wander the yard at their own discretion. It's quite willy-nilly, as they graze the lawn, then over into the weed patch, then by the fences. It's like a kid in a candy store. I get the best results, when I use the electric netting to confine them to an area, and move the netting, only after *all* the weeds have been eradicated from that area. The netting is flexible, so you can configure a paddock any way you'd like, square, triangle, trapezoid for those hard to reach areas! I use netting that has stakes built in. You string it between sturdy end post, or can drive t-posts if you are doing this temporarily. In hard clay soil or rock, it is difficult to push the stakes in. I won't fool you there. Keep the netting taut for best results. Electric netting works well on miniature Cheviots since they have no insulating wool on their faces. As long as there is current in the fence, they will respect it. I would not suggest it for separating ewes and rams, however. Connor, my Brecknock Hill ram can jump a 3' fence in a heartbeat. No wonder my unplanned "oops" lambs look like him!

For weed-eating, I have found that the miniature Cheviots are unsurpassed. They will tackle the most unpalatable weeds, brush, and sticker bushes. If you follow the precautions, as outlined above, you will see them do remarkable job on noxious weeds, in an eco-friendly way, fertilizing as they go! In this writer's opinion, it's absolutely worth the extra effort.